

Cleon Leany and His Service in World War II

Cleon Leany enlisted in the Army Air Corps in 1939, just a few months prior the war in Europe. Mr. Leany was as he described a “19 year old farm kid from Hinckley, Utah”. The depression had brought on hard times, and there were no jobs in Hinckley, or in the nearby town of Delta, Utah, so you Cleon Laney went to Salt Lake City to enlist. Little did he know what lay ahead. The Army Air Corp later notified him that he’d been accepted.

There were only two men from Utah accepted at the time, which may have been why Mr. Leany was not required to participate in basic training. His first job was on a refueling truck. It lasted one week. Shortly after that, Mr Laney spent six month at radio communications school at Albrook Airfield in the Panama Canal Zone. There he was trained as a radio technician and high speed morse code telegrapher.

After finishing his schooling, Leany was assigned to west of Rio Hato, a tiny one strip landing field about seventy miles from the Panama Canal Zone. His job was to help land the aircraft as control tower operator, and give weather reports which he made simply by looking outside. Rio Hato was also a practice sight for bombers. Mr Leany remembers watching the planes practice by dropping bags of flour around 10,000 feet in an attempt to hit a target that was roughly 50 feet in diameter.

His weather reports on wind velocity helped the bomber pilots calculate when to drop the bags. Leany described his weather reports as such “I would take a look...and guess at it...I would look out my window and the windsock was right outside...if it was straight out, 30 mph wind; if it was down, plus a little, 15 mph; and if it was straight out plus a lot of tumbling weeds...” pausing to laugh, he went on to say, “I would start off in the morse code RHWX which is Rio Hato Weather”. After a period of six months or so I was a weatherman. I insist that I’m

the only weather man who ever actively worked in it that was one hundred percent right...every afternoon at 2 o'clock it started to rain.

An experience on Rio Hato that was particularly memorable for Cleon Laney came one day when he heard on his radio a voice saying:

"Rio Hato radio, this is Lieutenant Barnett. I need to land. Give me landing instruction please". I said "listen Lieutenant", (he was in a B18 which is a two engine bomber)"...it's raining too hard. You can't get down here. Go on back to Albrook (airfield), He Says, "I can't do it gotta get down now, you've gonna have to guide me down." So he circled and I watched and he finally came in sight and I go "Lieutenant, your're lined up to the runway now. Land. Go ahead and land". I says, you're about fifty feet off the ground...now you're thirty feet off the ground...no you're ten feet off the ground, Land! He landed, turned the plane around and taxied back to the radio shack and he walked in and said, "Listen, you about got me killed". and I said "Listen, two years ago I was a farm kid in a country town in Utah...I 'm sorry I did the best I could do." I loved that job.

Following Rio Hato, Mr. Leany returned to Albrook Airfield, for a brief period. there he had to help land another bomber pilot in trouble. It was a nightmare, and a pilot by the name of Captain Kelly had fallen asleep and flown off course. He radioed Albrook Airfield and said he was unsure whether he was over the Atlantic or the Pacific Ocean. Leany, who was the only radio operator working that night, told the pilot that he could use the radio range (homing device) in order to navigate his way back. To their disappointment, and surprise, it wasn't running and Mr. Laney did not have access to it to turn it on. Leany then had the idea to have the pilot prepare to turn on his landing light so that nearby ships could see him to let him know where he was located.

Strangely when Leany radioed for ships that were near the canal in the Pacific and the Atlantic, he found that there were none. as a last resort, Leany decided to have the Captain choose a direction to fly in and if he heard the radio signal fade

then that would tell him he was headed away from the Airfield. They tried this and it worked. The pilot began to hear the radio signal fade, so he turned around and headed in the opposite direction and was able to find Albrook. He landed with only fifteen minutes of fuel remaining. After relating these two stories of helping the bombers land at Rio Hato and Albrook, Mr Leany stated, "The Air Force owes me \$500,000 for saving those two planes. I've thought about sending them a bill".

Following that experience, Mr. Leany was allowed to leave for visit home. He had advanced to the rank of Tech Sergeant. His visit was cut short because of the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. Sergeant Leany reported back to Albrook and was assigned to the nearby David Airfield. At David, Mr. Leaney was chief operator of the radio station for both the Army Air Corp and the Pan American Airways. Their purpose was foremost to protect the canal from being bombed. Planes were required to check in with the radio operator before flying across the canal. To prevent planes from bombing the canal, barrage balloons were set in place. These large balloons were suspended high in the air, and fastened to the ground by steel cables. Low altitude barrage balloons reached heights of 6,000 feet, while high altitude balloons reached 20,000 feet. Barrage balloons were first sent to Panama in 1939 and were frequently used in various areas of the world throughout the war.

Mr. Leany also remembers watching ships travel through the Panama Canal at David. They were required to check in for permission to pass through, just as the planes were. Once permitted to pass through, the gates would open and water would be pumped into the canal to increase its depth to that of the sea.

In late 1942, while he was at David, Sergeant Leany was given the opportunity to attend Officer Candidate School in New Jersey. He decided to go. The trip to the states was by boat. The journey was a perilous one due to the fact that German U-Boats had been terrorizing the eastern seaboard. In the first six months of 1942, on the east coast, the allies lost 173 boats (834,196 tons of shipping), and 144 of those were sunk by U-boats.

In May and June of that same year, Admiral Donitz of Germany began to shift the focus of U-Boats attacks to the Caribbean, and the Gulf of Mexico. After just three months, Donitz had sunk some 750,000 tons of Allied shipping in the area. As a result, ships were escorted by navy destroyers.

The ship that took Cleon Leany to Panama in 1939, did not have an escort. On that trip, the troop transport ship had several men on board assigned the task of watching for German subs. During the return voyage in 1942, with a destroyer escort, had and his fellow troops were alerted that a U-Boat had been spotted. Their ship was near Guantanamo Bay, and was sent there where a safety net was drawn across the bay to prevent U-Boats from entering. Then, Leany and the rest of the crew waited.

Their destroyer escort went on ahead, found the U-Boat, and sank it. Me Leany remembered passing by the large oil slick left behind on the water by the submarine. U-Boat records show that U94 was sunk on August 28, 1942 off of Haiti which is just southeast of Guantanamo. Mr. Leany estimated that his voyage occurred around September of 1942, very close to that date. The probability that this was the same sub is quite high when considering that record indicate U94 was the only German Sub in the Caribbean sanki close to that time.

The boat sailed on. A few nights later, Sergeant Laney had a difficult time sleeping. He was restless and decided to go up on the deck of the ship. Alone on the bow he stared ahead, mesmerized by the sounds of the waves hitting the boat and the hum of the engine. As the dawn approached, he saw a speck on the horizon. The ship drew closer and he recognized what it was, the Statue of Liberty. He then leapt to his feet, stood up tall, and saluted. With tears in his eyes he said, “I love my country with all my heart, I love the United States of America”. It was an experience Cleon Laney would never forget.

Shortly after his training in Officer Candidate School, Mr Leany was called to serve in the combat zone of the Pacific. He was ordered to report at Fort Shafter in Honolulu, Hawaii. While there, Leany, witnesses a tragedy at Pearl Harbor that is

rarely spoken of, occurring nearly three years after the original “Day of Infamy”.

Though the exact date is debated (some sources claim it was May 21, 1944), Mr Leany asserts that it was Sunday June 4, 1944. He was sitting on the steps of the barracks at Pearl City overlooking the harbor and saw twelve naval LST's destroyed. “As I looked, the first ship, then the second one, then the third one...all twelve blew up. This was Pearl Harbor number two”. The ships were numbered among hundreds that had been prepared for a top-secret mission to Saipan, Hollywood Filmmaker and Marie, Harold Weinberger was there with his camera recording the event on tape. A recent documentary produced by the History Channel contains this rare footage. Though the disaster is somewhat obscured, it left 3,000 dead.

There are differing theories on how they were destroyed. Whether from a bomb placed under the hull of one ship, and those nearby caught fire from the explosion, or if all the ships had bombs under the hulls is uncertain. The attack was well coordinated, and how the attackers knew where the boats would be, and when they'd be there in order to inflict maximum damage is a mystery.

According to Mr. Leany, a Brigadier General was stationed at Fort Shafter at that time. He had sent his wife back home to the states. After doing so, the Brigadier General had his oriental secretary move in with him. The question of whether or not this affair enabled the Japanese to get inside information is an interesting one, though difficult to prove. Mr. Leany maintains that this played a major role in bringing about the disaster, and that the bombing had to be an inside job performed by Japanese residing in Hawaii.

Attempts by the Japanese to attack American soil weren't uncommon. In March of 1942, Japanese bombers took off from the Marshall Islands and attempted to bomb Pearl harbor. The plan failed because dense clouds obscured their targets, causing their bombs to land in the Ocean, miles off course. They also launched thousands of bomb carrying balloons which were intended to be carried by the jet streams across the Pacific to the west coast. However many of the

bombs missed their targets and those that landed on U.S. soil only caused minor damage. Other plans were made but not carried out, and those that were, were ineffectual.

While at Fort Shafter, Cleon Leany, now a Lieutenant, was given the assignment of heading and organizing a communication team. As a vital part of the strategic island hopping campaign in the Pacific, Lieutenant Leany's team followed behind the Marines and Seabees, setting up communication systems.

Two weeks after his arrival in Hawaii, Cleon Leany received his first introduction to the realities of the combat zone. In an effort to share with me the indescribable horror he witnesses after landing on Eniwetok, he stated that he saw "hundreds of dead scattered in every direction, smells....flies so bad you couldn't open your mouth without drawing some in. I put a helmet over my face so the flies couldn't get in my mouth, we had to use mosquito nets...that was my first experience with combat." Most of the Japanese Mr. Leany saw throughout the war were dead. To bury them on Eniwetok, he remembered that a large trench was dug, and with a bulldozer the bodies were carried to the trench and dumped inside. The trench was then covered with dirt, and an airstrip was built over the top of it. "It was a terrible experience", he said, "The Japanese also had the habit of putting a hand grenade under their dead, and if you turned over it would set off the grenade."

On Eniwetok, Lieutenant Leany and his crew constructed a control tower and a homing transmitter which he referred to as a "radio range". This system enabled bombers leaving Eniwetok for the island to Truk (the headquarters of the Japanese Navy for the Pacific), to find their way to the site of attack, and return back to Eniwetok.

Later on, the Marines landed on Tinian. Three days after the invasion. Leany and his crew were ordered to go ashore. He remembered and innocent mistake they had made:

I was to take my team ashore as soon as the marines had secured the town of Tinian. My team and I moved in and set up camp right on the edge of town

near a ravine. The marines were camped 200 yards in front of us... the Marine Corp Captain discovered my location. As the night darkened, he whispered to me, "Leany, this is the front line! To keep the Japanese on the other side of the ravine throughout the night, our Marines would fire flares into the air to illuminate the darkness, the Marines then fired volleys from the 50 caliber machine guns. I knew if the Japanese made it back up the ravine, they could possibly overpower and kill my team and myself. No one got much sleep that night with the enemy dug in several hundred yards away on the opposite ravine. The enemy gun fire was buzzing around the structure my crew was bedded down in. Gratefully no one from the team died that night. I can assure you there were promises made that night if we survived the ordeal, I prayed throughout the night."

Thier mission on Tinian was to build a radio tower, and a radio station on Masalog Point. They helped to alert Air Defense Command on nearby Saipan of any Japanese bombers heading to the island after being sighted on the radar. Mr Leany recalled an occasion where the use of this system had enabled the allies to shoot down 48 Japanese bombers in one night. Building the station was no easy task. A cave was located within 100 yards of the construction site where some of the remaining Japanese soldiers were hiding. Mr. Leany remarked that the possibility of being in the sights of a Japanese sniper rifle "made a nervous wreck out of ya"

Lieutenant Leany's fears only increased when he was assigned to go to Saipan to oversee the construction of a radio telephone and teletype system on top of Mount Tapochau. There, 300 Japanese snipers had been organized to kill or snare off anyone possible. The top of the mountain was fairly level and was surrounded by thick vegetation that the Japanese would hide behind. while on the project, a Japanese sniper shot one of his fellow servicemen through the temple, killing him. Following the shooting, one of the men took an M-1 and went out to find the Sniper. Afterward he took Lieutenant Leany and showed him not only 1, but 5 dead Japanese snipers as proof of his work. Although leany was given a 45 handgun to carry on a shoulder holster, it didn't bring much comfort because he

knew that he wasn't the hunter, but the hunted.

Later on Saipan, a friend of Mr. Leany's shot and killed a Japanese soldier he had caught sneaking into their supplies. Leany hated the violence associated with the war and was glad his primary responsibility wasn't to kill or be in combat. "I saw so much violence that by the time the war was over I was sick of being a professional soldier.

While I landed on Kwajalein, I saw a u.S. soldier sitting on top of a dead Japanese soldier, using his knife to cut the gold out of the Japanese soldier's teeth. It was so bizarre. I don't understand how a person could do that". Without doubt, these experiences have had a profound emotional impact on Cleon, who still has nightmares of the war. His screams alarm his wife, and she does her best to comfort him.

Amidst all the dangers, they were able to finish the project which involved building three large radio antennas. These antennas permitted Admiral Hoover (Cleon's commander) to hold a radio conference with George Marshall in Washington D.C., General Macarthur, Admiral Nimitz or whoever necessary. The radio telephone, and in particular, the teletype systems proved to be of "inestimable value" for communication throughout the war in the Pacific and in other areas as well.

"The teletype arrangement proved the most satisfactory, since it afforded opportunity for a fast two-way exchange of views and information and provided a complete record of the discussion. Teletype Conferences were particularly valuable when preparations were being made for assault operations and the theaters were confronted with the usual and urgent needs for supplies and equipment.

After completing the project on Saipan, Cleon returned to Tinian, and the war ended soon after. When asked what he thought about the August 1945 atomic bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Cleon related an experience he had after returning home. One day a Japanese woman came into his office at the store he

owned and notice a map of Tinian on Cleon's wall. After asking him about the map, she spoke to him of the atrocities her people suffered from the incendiary and atomic bombs. He sensed that she was still bitter about it.

Cleon went on to say that the dropping of the bombs was a terribly sad event, but saved thousands of lives. He spoke of the leaflets that were dropped in Japan prior to the bombing. Dropping leaflets as a warning before bombings wasn't uncommon for the Allies to do. Mr. Leany remembered the warning on the leaflets saying, "seven more days and we're gonna wipe you off the face of the earth...give up...quit. He found it interesting that even after the bomb was dropped some of Japan's military leaders still didn't want to quit fighting. Leany feels that if the bomb wasn't dropped, he would have been part of a mass invasion of Japan. Due to the high estimates of casualties that the allies would have suffered in that mainland invasion, he may have been one of them.

While in Tinian, Cleon made application to go home. The war was over, and Cleon remembered sitting in his office one day, on Tinian, when a fellow serviceman came to speak with him. While there, the man asked what Cleon was going to do with his handgun. "Why? Do you want it?" Cleon asked. The man said he did. Cleon grabbed the gun and threw it to him. Cleon said of the experience, "I was so tired of the war, I didn't even want to own a gun", Cleon was granted his wish to return home. He packed 15 clean uniforms for the return trip. One of them stands today in the Veteran's Hall in Lehi, Utah, next to his father's who served World War I.

After the war, Cleon decided to settle down and start a family. He served in the officer's reserve until April 1, 1953, when he was honorably discharged. He gave up the opportunity of having a successful military career. Leany continued to receive Christmas cards from the men he served with for more than 120 years after the war. A few of them still refer to him as "Lieutenant Laney".

Cleon Laney and his wife met after the war while she was working at a store owned by Cleon's parents, who had recently moved to Lehi. They were married

six months later. Together they have five children, many grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. It only takes a short time being with Cleon to see how much he loves his wife and family. He is so happy to have been able to raise them in a nice community and country, with the freedoms he fought to keep. “There’s no better place on earth than the U.S.”, he said.

One thing I’ve notice among the veterans I’ve interviewed is that they are so appreciative of the things they have. They cherish what many American take for granted, namely, our freedoms and family relationships. Cleon personifies this gracious attitude. On Memorial Day of 2008, Cleon Laney was recognized for his service in a large gathering at the Legacy Community Center in Lehi, Utah. If they built a monument a mile high in recognition of the farmboy Leany, and others like him, it wouldn’t be high enough.